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CutBank Reviews

Walter McDonald, *Witching on Hardscrabble*; Spoon River Poetry Press, Peoria, Illinois, 1986; \$3.95 paper

Richard Hugo once suggested that if a book of poems packed "6 Pistols" it could be considered a success. Walter McDonald's *Witching on Hardscrabble* is a veritable gunrunner, offering the reader a variety of firepower. This is not to suggest that every one of the 54 poems in the five, well-synchronized sections works flawlessly, but that the majority exhibit high qualities of resonance and image, and transcend, by a passionate notch, or ten, the lowly class of "filler poem."

In "Rigging The Windmill," McDonald writes, "Living on hardscrabble, / I know good rain when I smell it." As evidenced by the third stanza, he knows good lingo when he hears it, as well:

I shake my head. Another well
witched with a willow stick.
Peeled white, hollow in the heartwood,
it dragged me like a magnet . . .

McDonald works as effectively in the short lyric as in the long narrative. Listen to the second stanza of "Cimarron:"

Down in the caves,
back from skimming the dark
buzzing rapids, bats grip the belly
of heaven and swing like bells.

Along with his ability to effect harmonic echoes of inner rhyme, and to work in a wide variety of line lengths, McDonald has the knack to suddenly, but subtly, shift focus through the use of precise and startling images. "First Freeze" addresses how pigs sense their slaughter as the seasons change, the tone of the poem made appropriately eerie by the concluding sequence:

. . . Even the gate
squeaking at feeding time scares them,

reminds them of winter, of knives
whining on whetstones, of hooks
in the smokehouse, twisting on swivels
that click like a rifle bolt.

And again in "Summer Nights":

. . . We listened hard and heard
far in the distance the evening train
to Houston wailing long after any human
hand could have pulled the cord.

Yet another strong example can be drawn from the poem "Growing Up Flying," my *second* favorite piece in the book. It reminisces about the author's father, who we assume was a pilot, coming home from his work. This poem catapults from the opening line, then gains narrative momentum and altitude, often getting its propulsion from the lovely sounding language such as "Immelmanns" and "chandelles." The last eight lines convey beautifully how a child's free association of detail leads him to a haunting sensibility:

I stood at the window and thought of nests

shaking in the mountain winds, and nothing
seemed tied down to the earth,
not Father or Mother, not me,
not magpies like the days
of my childhood flying by,
not logs in the fireplace
going up in flames.

Walter McDonald's poems are triggered, in large part, by physical experience — hunting, fishing, flying, mountain climbing, driving snowplow, "Rafting the Brazos," butchering hogs, "Night Skiing on Lake Buchanan," etc. But it's evident that: a.) the "swashbuckler flavor" is *not* the ingredient most responsible for the poems' alluring qualities, and that b.) McDonald is capable of turning a powerful verse entirely from the imagination — capable of tapping into the more abstract:

Silent for years,
they dream of leaves, of wood dust
light as feathers. They dream
they pick up their beds

and walk away. They have found
where the birds go. In time
the other trees look down
and find them missing. (from "Where the Trees Go")

Finally, bias or no bias, my favorite poem in this book, "For Richard Hugo." Since Dick's death in October of 1982, his friends have written countless elegies. (I've tried several myself.) However, with the exception of one by his wife, Ripley, I've felt none of them more sentimentally effective than this piece — a sincere and suitably colloquial tribute, reprinted here in full:

For Richard Hugo

from his words

Wide as a lumberjack, he loved to flick
a hook to something, and wrote about it
better. He dipped his pen in the white

center of the page and made mad
steelheads leap through rapids
that almost rhymed. If you didn't care

what happened to people drinking
cheap toaky alone in sad towns, he said
fine, but stay the hell away from him.

He remembered their names
in cracked Italian. *Beware of this guy*
he scribbled on a picture after his crash

at twenty, cigarette dangling,
dark oxygen-mask ring around his face.
He mourned buddies streaming like sand

through thousands of feet. On earth,
he said, you can say goodbye.
If you were lost or crippled,

loved fishing or softball or only someone
who didn't matter to anyone but you,
if you went by he would say welcome.

If you claim to have known and loved Dick Hugo and his work, and this poem does not make you swallow hard, "fine," that's your prerogative as a reader, "but stay the hell away from me." Don't, however, stay away from the other 53 poems in this collection. You're certain to discover, among Walter McDonald's great variations of structure and theme, 6 pieces you'll consider "pistols." And their grips will be pearl.

Paul Zarzyski

Ray Gonzalez, *From the Restless Roots*; Arte Público Press, University of Houston, Houston, Texas, 1986.

If we were to draw the shape of *From the Restless Roots*, we would draw a circle, for Ray Gonzalez's first book of poetry is an odyssey that begins and returns, finally, to the point of embarkation. Divided into three sections, Gonzalez's journey begins at the edge of language and experience, a place where we "walk these craters, / these ruins, a whole civilization / lost across the void." Then Gonzalez descends into the very heart of

his past, only to ascend once more "over the smell of the sea / and the scent of the land" to that place "where the moon knows its pale light is / the only beam from heaven I believe."

Like any general summoning his troops to battle, Gonzalez opens his book by summoning his strength and ours with "Prayer":

When we skip as wolves
over hot coals,
may the black earth divide
its fortunes among us.
When we drop cries
into watery canyons,
may our voices echo
as valuable gifts.

From here, Gonzalez journeys forth into a land of cactus, arroyas, haciendas, crumbling churches, where "my friend, the insane truckdriver / hands me the bottle / and we enter the storm." It is here that Gonzalez gains most strength, where his uses of simple, straightforward language and vivid imagery converge into powerful poems. And it is here where we, as readers, are brought most immediately into the poems, where we:

. . . see what matters,
why futile stars hang
in the sky to witness
the complete end to childhood.

Poems such as "I Have Gone Blind," "Four Towns, Don Juan de Oñate Trail, New Mexico," "For the Vacant Houses," and "To Those That Wait for Halley's Comet" speak articulately to the painful discovery that we, like any immigrant, have been freed from the fetters of the past only to face dispossession. This is most beautifully captured in "The Church, San Pablo, New Mexico":

The church has finally fallen.
The whispered words are down.
This small pueblo is centered
in a gaping hole of silence,
the crown of the ruins.
Its walls are open to the sun,
its roof the blue sky of prayer.
Dozens of pigeons roost
on the steeple,
the cross at the top
the highest point of blessing.
I had not come to this sacred ground
of childhood in years.
The unexpected crumbling reveals
the old, magnetic pull and fear,
the search for what is left,

(no stanza break)

what holy bodies remain
 among the piles of brick and
 shattered, stained-glass windows.
 Whatever still kneels here on
 the pulpit of grass and mud
 chants a wish for me to walk
 under the open arches and search
 for those old whispers,
 those old bodies limping
 out of the confessional,
 its booths now exposed to the sun,
 the sins and whispers that bled there
 leaving mounds of adobe as artifacts,
 abandoning the spirit of the saints
 that absorbs the broken walls.

Finally, Gonzalez's foray into the past brings him to the place where he began, "the end of the spoken journey, / tired poets and tired animals waiting for the rain / to wash away their footprints, all their clear tracks." And return he must for "like the astronomer gone off / on too much wine, / too many hours spent looking through the telescope, / too many visions of a collision / that would rearrange / his place in heaven", the past is not a comfortable resting place. Like any returning hero, Gonzalez is not the same man that ventured forth, for journeys, however painful, have their rewards:

The trees bristling with water
 cut into the clouds.
 One moment under them is a chance to write
 our own invitation,
 our own demand to be
 a part of the falling,
 the wet cutting
 into clearer shapes.

Caroline Patterson Haebele

Patricia Henley, *Friday Night at Silver Star*, Graywolf Press, St. Paul, 1986, \$7.50 paper

Patricia Henley's, *Friday Night at Silver Star*, is a collection of eight short stories which was selected as winner of the 1985 Montana Arts Council First Book Award. Her collection was selected by James Crumley, a novelist/screenwriter, and Robert Wrigley, poet and former editor of the *Slackwater Review*. The stories are set in the West, though they are not confined to a Western audience, and many take place in or around Bozeman, Montana where Ms. Henley currently resides.

The book is framed by two stories, whose major character is named Sunbow. She lives in a commune/ranch/neighborly arrangement and is characterized by her best friend and the narrator of the stories as a 46-year-old woman for whom, "Men are as necessary to her survival as water, or so she thinks." (*Let me call you Sweetheart*).

Recurring throughout the collection is Ms. Henley's subtle insistence that we look at, laugh at, and really listen to what we do in terms of thought and action in reflecting the superficial values of our lives. She contrasts this with what we discover to be really important during the course of events. The continuing riddle of everyday existence. She grounds her insistence in: sexuality (and its confusion throughout all the stories); boredom (i.e. what will we do *tonight* to make our lives more exciting); the inherent isolation of individuals (despite the precautions we take to not be alone via roommates in *Moving In*, family in *The Birthing*, *Victory*, & *Picking Time*, and friends and sexual acquaintances in *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*, *Black Ice* & *Friday Night at Silver Star*); and the land and its inherent cultural voices.

She creates a balance of humor, satire and poignancy through multi-dimensional characters and events which make her groundings impossible to ignore. Listen to the closing passages of *The Birthing*:

(Angel is the wife in labor, Morgan — the husband and father, and Adam — the lamaze coach from the HOLY FOLKS who, "set up a tipi before dark, a bright canvas structure like a temple in the juniper woods.")

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Adam said. "Be strong."

"I said I'm taking her to town," Morgan blurted. He spread his feet in a defensive stance.

"She needs a coach, someone to help her through. It won't take long," Adam said. "I can do it."

Morgan felt as though he were invisible.

"Yes. Yes," Angel said, breathless and panting and up on her elbows. "Adam, stay with me."

Then she cried in longing, a cry so raw with want and need that Morgan turned away.

"Son-of-a-bitch," he whispered, beating his fist into his palm.

His face was flushed and contorted in anger. He slammed the door hard and rode the morning like a man in a foreign country, a man with no one home, working to obliterate the sound of Angel screaming.

And even as she held the waxy child, so new, with sky and clouds in each pale eye, Angel could hear the dull thud of Morgan splitting sugar pine as he had split her.

And what Henley finally makes us do as readers is *listen* and hear ourselves, a bitter reprieve for comprehension of seemingly innate shallowness, though she gives all credit for trying. She admits to eccentricity. And she captures the overriding morality and reflective platitudes of the American West. One of the few places where the people will still openly voice its nature.

"Where was that? Where you grew up?" he asked.

"Miles City, Montana. Grandma owned a drinking establishment there."

"My grandma never touched a drop."

"Mine hardly ever did either. She sold it. . . ."

And later,

. . . He watched them walk away, ducking branches as they went. His father had reverted to a former style, with neater clothes and shorter hair. *What goes around comes around*, Margo said. Now he understood the expression and he wondered if people aren't trapped forever in themselves, culturally stamped to be a certain way no matter how much they want to change. His father had been a fervent back-to-the-lander, in denim and manure-caked boots. The business card was the color of green apples. It read, *Bean Sprout Cafe and Pickin' Parlor. Eric and Jocelyn, Proprietors.*

(from "Picking Time")

Bronwyn G. Pughe

Rita Dove, *Fifth Sunday*; Callaloo Fiction Series, University of Kentucky, Lexington, 1985

Rita Dove, a talented young poet, has just published her first collection of short stories. In the title story, "Fifth Sunday," fourteen year old Valerie learns how innocent affection and goodness can be laid low by a word like a stone in a snowball.

Imagine . . . you're playing outside with no other thought but fun when suddenly, from nowhere, a hard coldness slams into you — an arrow of ice — and when it's all over, you've lost half your sight. It must be horrible. It must be something you could never forget. (p.5)

Valerie's vow to find the woman whose words have crushed her reputation and pride acts as a call to dignity and survival that the remaining stories follow.

Half-sighted is to have vision worth fighting for while being irreparably aware of what made you that way. In "Aunt Carrie" an old woman waits her entire adult life to tell her side of a story. By doing so she proves more deserving of the affection of a child whose mother had ostracized the aunt all those years ago. In "The Spray Paint King" a young man memorizes the names of construction workers who were allowed to die by an act of negligence on the part of his father. He then acts out the terrifying consequences of his wounded sight by creating a graffiti of obsessive despair.

Oh citizens who have forgotten, I was there to remind you, I put the stain back on the wall — no outraged slogan, no incoherent declaration of love, but a gesture both graceful and treacherous, a free fall ending in disaster — among the urgent scrawls of history, a mere flick of the wrist. (p. 22)

In another story, that of a crazy and passionate woman "who looks like a man, a black woman with lint in her nappy hair and one shoe in her hand" (p. 55) ("Zabriah")

Rita Dove gives us a character who storms the local poetry club meeting, refusing to be excluded after paying her dues. After questioning the validity of the poems read by the other members she reads some of her own, and when a member compares her to the gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson, Zabiah replies:

I don't remember anyone over the age of twelve, she retorts, pivoting on her one good heel and marching, sallying forth under the voluminous skeleton of the arcade, its airy parabolas, its invisible drums, its iron angels singing. (p.58)

The assertion of individual pride, even if it involves an act of despair, is the thrust of these stories. The assertion comes after shattered innocence and comes in whatever strange way circumstances will allow. These are fine stories and show Ms. Dove to be a powerful prose writer as well as an exciting poet.

Bette Tomlinson

Matthew Hansen, *Clearing*; Kutenai Press; Missoula, MT; 1986; \$5.95 paper

"What lives is what he left in air, definite, / unseen, hanging where he stood when he roared."

—Richard Hugo

In October of 1982, the world of letters suffered a loss that it has not yet fully come to terms with, though the many elegies for Richard Hugo, published in the wake of his untimely death, are ample testament to the attempt to do so. It has been less noted that, a very short time later, we suffered another immeasurable loss, as Matthew Hansen, Hugo's 24-year-old stepson, followed his father into death, leaving a double-dose of grief for family and friends, and a few dozen poems to mark his passage. It is our consolation that these poems, now published as *Clearing*, the first release from Kutenai Press, show Hansen to have been a tremendously precocious poet, capable of stunning poignancy, whose work will outlive him by many years.

As might be expected from a poet in his early twenties, Hansen shows his influences without embarrassment. Titles such as "Walking into Silence" and "Preparing for Dark" suggest the mid-sixties James Wright, as does much of the language and imagery of the earlier poems in this collection: "Dark lives groaned underground." And it would be hard to read Hansen's work without finding the influence of his great stepfather (see "The Silver Grill Cafe," or "Poem for a Beautiful Woman"). But the more recent poems in this book suggest that he was already far beyond this early stage of imitation and flattery, already discovering his own voice, a delicate instrument capable of melding Wright's emotional vulnerability with Hugo's linguistic terseness, which would serve as the perfect vehicle for his own complex sensibility. In poems such as "Nomad," "Clearing," and "Four Letters from the End of Summer," the young poet finds expression for his loves and dreams in language strict enough to avoid sentimentality. In "Wind," his skillful off-rhymes and assonances allow him to walk this emotional tightrope with ease:

In ancient dreams of mine
 the leaves were green, the half moon
 shone through fleeting clouds. But now wind
 has found my sleep, I dream empty bodies
 in a house that has no doors.
 I wake from my bones
 and wail in the wind.

Throughout this work, we sense the young poet's struggle with what language can and cannot do, and his yearning to fulfill its promises:

August first and I wanted
 some other word for year, some long sound
 about the way quick leaves throw light,
 fade out with knapweed in the yellow dust.
 A moan for ice, old drum for snow,
 and whitewater yell of spring
 returning into blood.

(from "Four Letters from the End of Summer")

But even more central to Hansen's sensibility is his struggle to affirm this life, its flesh, and the tasks that must be done. Many of these poems return in their endings to joyful affirmation of the physical world. This is done most convincingly in in "First Bleeding," where the killing and butchering of a buck, rendered with stark realism, becomes a ritualistic act of purgation (ending with the celebratory "Praise the hot blood steaming/ on your hands, on your forehead."), and again in the astounding "Reprieve: Adoration of the Body." In the latter poem, written during cancer treatment in Seattle and dedicated to his doctors, Hansen displays a keen love of the physical and an appreciation for its simple pleasures that only one whose physical existence is imminently threatened can know with such authenticity and unabashed jubilation:

Joyous motion of the blood, faithful
 heart, we owe the doctors and the unknown
 donors once again. This radiant sun breathes
 in the deep Sound, between Olympic
 peaks and cold surf. We hunger
 now and turn for home. Pour me beer,
 I'll feast on liverwurst and rye.

Sadly, this celebration passed as Hansen came to realize that his donors and doctors and even the good earth itself could not help him enough: "So the sweet air/ and tall trees of God's country/ didn't save us after all. . . ." In "Still Alive," his last poem, Hansen captures for us all the plaintiveness and uncertainty of the human condition, suspended in the particulars of this luminous world we can only marvel at: "I am still alive doing fifty/ on the Aurora Bridge. Cloud breaks/ and the white houses of Ballard/ shine, they shine."

Reading *Clearing*, the reader is struck by a profound sense of loss for the man behind these poems, and for what his poetry might have become. Yet this sense of loss, of our tragic impermanence, is at the heart of great poetry. It is the basis for affirmation, as Matt Hansen so obviously knew:

Barns collapse, and you should know
 your heart collapses too. We spend our lives
 learning bone, so put your faith in rock
 and hope for lichen on your ribs.
 I fall and wait for wind
 to bleach me barren white. You should
 take these bones and build a home.

(from "Credo")

Joseph Martin

Jeanne Dixon, *Savages*, 1985 Merriam-Frontier Award, University of Montana, Missoula, 1986, \$3.00

Through humor and dramatic mirrorings, these four stories reveal a companionship with frustration and survival. The smooth forward motion combined with a natural working in of past-related details creates a looping effect within each story. I had the feeling—I've met these people somewhere.

"Two Medicine Eagle" avoids the obvious stereotype traps of sheep ranchers -vs- eagle and Indian saves eagle. Told from the first person coming-of-age view point, it presents the characters in a natural, believable manner. The female narrator is recalling her reactions to a "crime" committed by an eagle, her lust for revenge on the already wounded eagle and is faced with this scene:

"It was perched on a high jagged stump. Two golden malevolent eyes, a thick curved beak of golden horn that swiped through the air in our direction. White crown feathers spiked forward at an unbalanced pitch; wings lifted, spread, fell. A scream emerged from the eagles chest. *Rage*. It was not beautiful at all."

This rage is the center of the story. Crazy Boy's feelings, the narrator's observations, her father's frustrations when he must be lifted into the car by his daughter—This is the rage against the death-frame we all face, against the injustices in life. The power in the story is seeing how much choice she does have and being able to draw upon that as an adult who now faces her father's death. The attention to detail by the author enhances the story and allows the reader the choice of putting together his own feelings.

A rage of another kind appears in "In a Garden of Approximate Desires," a subtle, more controlled rage, yet it is just as frustrating for the professor who desires one of his female students. He feels he gets to know her through the quantity of writing she's turned in for his course, and he plots to make her his own. In a tragic-comic manner, he imagines luring her into his office on the pretext of getting her words published. He sees this act of getting published as "... a common lust: to see one's own words in print. . ." and compares it with a flasher in the park:

"His perverse desire to show his part in public springs from no fond hope or delusion that his member is superior to that of any other, only that it does exist, and with it, *him*."

"Dancing in the Dark" is a modern day Belinda, older, but not any wiser. Instead of brocade, barons, beaus, and maids, she has credit cards, game shows, and *National Enquirer*, all the while stuffing herself with junk foods. Instead of a *slyph*, she has Sister

Esmeralda. Her "rape" is the *waiting* for her ex-lover, Walter to return (we know he won't). She is a victim of her own fantasy realities—a three-wheeled car, rattlesnakes in her mailbox. From line one in the story she admits to this victimization:

"Take for instance night before last when the bed catches fire, and I am the only one in it."

Unlike Belinda, her rage never seems to reach any intensity, but remains static as she makes the rounds (with her dog) of fast-food burger chains, hoping the gas credit cards hold out. . .

"In Lovee Thompstone's *Jungle*," the jungle is not the Island where she teaches and feels a failure, but a jungle within that is choking and threatening to kill her. She sees death all around, describes the foliage as "poison green," demands her neighbor cut the flowering oliana ("It's already three-fourths dead. . .") because rats live and breed there. Her no-nonsense attitude mingles with the Island myths and beliefs. The result is a confrontation of Lovee with her "boxed" self. This story relies on humor to point out Lovee's failings and confusions. This opens into a broader sense of Lovee's sensibilities as a mirror to one's own sensibilities.

The popular notion of "savages" is not the underlying movement in these stories. Jeanne Dixon has allowed the reader to experience an energy common to us all—civilized or not—that energy is what allows people to survive and continue as a people in the face of many forms of adversaries: internal or external.

Linda WeaselHead